

Shiga toxin E. coli infection (STEC)

What is it?

E. coli (*Escherichia coli*) are bacteria that live in the gut of people and animals. Most E. coli are harmless. However, some produce a toxin (poison) that can make people very sick. These E. coli are called STEC, which stands for shiga-toxin producing E. coli. They are also called VTEC. A common strain is E. coli O157.

How do you get STEC E.coli infection?

People can get STEC infection when they swallow the bacteria: by eating contaminated food, drinking contaminated water, or by getting the bacteria to their mouths from their fingers.

Sources include:

- Eating contaminated raw or undercooked food
- Drinking unpasteurised (raw) milk
- Drinking contaminated water
- Contact with farm animals or animal poo/manure
- Contact with poo from sick people

Remember that bacteria can get on to your hands when changing nappies, cleaning toilets, handling raw meat, gardening with manure, etc. It is very important to wash your hands as soon as possible after these activities.

How do you know if you have it?

Illness usually starts 2 to 3 days later, but may be up to 10 days. The symptoms include severe stomach cramps, diarrhoea, vomiting and fever. The diarrhoea can be bloody. Most people recover in 5-7 days.

Some people who have positive tests for STEC do not have these symptoms, or may have had diarrhoea for a long time for other reasons. In these situations the STEC may be coincidental and not causing problems.

Treatment

Follow the advice of your doctor or nurse. Don't take antibiotics unless advised by a doctor.

Young children, elderly people and people with low immunity can get severe illness and may get serious complications.

Seek medical help early if:

- Illness is getting worse or not going away
- The person sick is a baby or young child and is not drinking fluids, not holding down fluids or is in severe pain
- The person sick seems unusually drowsy or confused.

If concerned, call HealthLine on 0800 611 116 for free advice, or see your GP.

What should you do if you/your child has STEC?

Those with STEC need to:

- Drink plenty of fluids. This is especially important for sick children as children become dehydrated easily.
- **Stay away** from work, school or early childhood centres (including playgroups, kohanga reo, aoga amata) until **free of symptoms for 48 hours**.
- Wash hands regularly with soap and hot water especially after visiting the toilet and before preparing food. Dry hands thoroughly.
- NOT prepare food for anyone else until 48 hours after symptoms stop.
- Use their own towel and not share with others. Stay away from swimming pools, hot tubs or splash pads.
- Bathe separately from others.

If you or your child is unwell, call your family doctor or Healthline on 0800 611 116 for free advice from a registered nurse 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

For further information call Regional Public Health on (04) 570 9002 or visit www.rph.org.nz

Regional Public Health

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